
Pro Rege

Volume 38 | Number 1

Article 6

September 2009

Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Zuidema, Leah A. and Zuidema, Todd M. (2009) "Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 38: No. 1, 34 - 35.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol38/iss1/6

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Rienstra, Debra, and Ron Rienstra. *Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry*. Engaging Worship Series. Eds. Clayton J. Schmit and Todd E. Johnson. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009. 286 pages. ISBN-978-0-8010-3616-3. Reviewed by Leah A. Zuidema, Assistant Professor of English at Dordt College, and Todd M. Zuidema, Pastor at Hope Christian Reformed Church in Hull, Iowa.

Worship Words is a study of the role of language in worship. As the authors explain in the first chapter, “worship language, like all of language, is *formative*” (28); words shape our understanding of God, creation, and ourselves. The authors approach this subject through a stereoscopic lens, blending perspectives from their two intersecting fields. The primary writing voice is that of Debra Rienstra, Associate Professor English at Calvin College, who offers insights from her work as a scholar of language and literature. However, the book is a collaborative project that also profits from the perspective of Ron Rienstra, Visiting Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship at Western Theological Seminary, who shares from his extensive experiences as a pastor who has planned worship in many different contexts. The authors note that Ron contributed his ideas and editing throughout the body of the text; his is also the leading voice in the sidebars and in two of the appendices. In addition to presenting their scholarly views, the Rienstras, who are married, also share anecdotes from their family’s experiences as worshippers. As reviewers whose writing situation is similar to that of the Rienstras (we are married and are active in worship leadership for our church), we recognize the challenge of transforming two-voiced conversations into a single, unified text. We appreciate the Rienstras’ gift for presenting their shared views as well as their individual perspectives. As the authors had hoped, *Worship Words* reads in many places like a rich conversation.

Their underlying premise is that worship language is important—not only what is said, but how. Whether we are hearing, speaking, or singing, our use of language in worship presents us, both explicitly and implicitly, with an image of God and an understanding of God’s attributes. Our worship words reflect and contribute to the development of our relationship with God. The authors suggest that we ought to attend to (though not necessarily “balance”) four dimensions of worship language: the expressive, aesthetic, instructive, and memorial. Additionally, they argue that those who plan and lead services should ensure that the language used is attuned to the *dialogic* character of worship. The term *dialogic* is often used to allude to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories about language and literature. In *Worship Words* (and in Bakhtin’s work), the term gives a sense of an ongoing, back-and-forth, conversational interaction. The Rienstras remind us that this is what worship is: God calls us to worship; we come in praise. We confess; God forgives. God speaks the Word; we respond in faith. God blesses; we leave in gratitude. Worship is not just us coming to God, but it is us coming in response to God’s call, and going with His blessing. Throughout a

worship service, our words should highlight elements of the ongoing dialogue.

Readers are also urged to consider how worship is dialogic in another sense: we participate not only as individuals (in a *devotional* mode) but also together, as a body of believers (in a *liturgical* mode). The Rienstras suggest that songs, prayers, litanies, the reading of Scripture—all of worship—should reflect that we come both as individuals and as community. Furthermore, worship should also look beyond the walls of the place of worship and consider the needs of the community outside, in both the local and global contexts.

The authors offer practical advice about how to accomplish dialogic worship. Examples include the suggestion that when the Psalms and other passages are read aloud, parts should be divided and given to different voices to make it clear when there are shifts in point of view from the individual to the communal (as in Psalm 121). Openings and closings of services should especially emphasize our corporate worship through songs where the lyrics speak for *us* rather than for *me*. People who write liturgies and sermons are encouraged to use vivid verbs that portray the many attributes of God; such verbs reflect the truth that God is vital and active in Creation, and they prompt us to think more deeply and broadly about who God is.

Later in the text, they discuss metaphorical language, including (but not limited to) the metaphors embedded in our language for God. Rienstra and Rienstra note that too often, the figurative language in our worship reflects a narrow view of God. Citing a critique put forth by British hymn writer Bryan Wren, the Rienstras draw our attention to the acronym *KINGAFAP* to reflect the short list of metaphors typically used to speak of God: *KING-God-Almighty-Father-and-Protector* (150). While Scripturally and theologically correct, the list is limiting and even reductive; the authors convincingly illustrate many additional metaphors in Scripture that reflect the range of God’s transcendent sovereignty as Creator and immanent, intimate involvement with Creation.

In “Watch Your Figures” and “Naming God” (two of the chapters most likely to provoke strong responses from readers), the authors examine important issues concerning gendered language in worship. Using anecdotes that frame the larger issues about gendered language, Rienstra and Rienstra affirm again the ongoing theme of the book: the words used in worship are important, including our words about God. As with their discussion of other issues, the writers address this topic by illustrating how careful and thoughtful words can teach the worshipping community

about who God is and how we, as image-bearers of God, should reflect those descriptions. In the endnotes for Chapter 7, the co-authors speak briefly about their intentional omission of masculine pronouns in reference to God. They acknowledge that their discussion of gendered pronouns deals with issues that are “extremely complex and, in many contexts, explosive” (146). As the authors explain early in the “Naming God” chapter, they structure this portion of the text so that those who may be offended by the very question of gendered pronouns for God are invited to read up to the final section and then, instead of reading on, to “consider the more general issues of imagination at the heart of the reflections” in the text up to that point (146). While we would hope that readers would respond thoughtfully to the full chapter rather than avoiding the question, we note the authors’ gentle and humble attitude toward skeptical readers. The authors’ work in this section, as elsewhere in the text, suggests that they are more interested in walking alongside their readers and learning together than they are in “winning” arguments.

In Chapters 8-11, Rienstra and Rienstra shift from the hermeneutical to helpful reminders that the worshipping church belongs to “a chorus of witnesses” that transcends time and cultures. Borrowing the old wedding adage “Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue,” they make their case for “chronological connectivity” (177). Worship should contain elements retained from history while also having an eye open to new

ways of communicating ancient truths. They look to the influence of the global church and advocate for borrowing from the wide diversity of cultural expressions of worship. Furthermore, they remind us that the church needs not only to praise and give thanks but to lament. As a group, these chapters are not as tightly focused on precise language issues as are the earlier chapters. However, they do serve to broaden our sense that while worship is unique to a person’s specific context, it is also connected, through language, to past and future generations as well as to a variety of cultures. The book concludes with practical advice about how to plan and incorporate our well-chosen words in worship, as well as reminders to carefully and collaboratively consider how worship services are designed.

Worship Words is a book with academic leanings. Yet it is also an accessible book. The authors avoid the temptation to overload the text with citations, endnotes, and jargon; where new terms are introduced, they are explained in straightforward language. The 12-chapter structure and the accompanying exercises and questions are helpful aids to those interested in a semester or season of collaborative study—whether inside or outside of a classroom setting. We can envision studying this text together with lay worship leaders and engaging in thoughtful conversations that lead to new understandings and practices. Rienstra and Rienstra equip readers to move from being passive recipients sitting in the crowd on Sunday mornings to being active worshippers within the communion of the saints.